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ABSTRACT

To examine the effects of goal-setting on supervisors' evaluations of workers' performance, and on the causes attributed to that performance, 80 subjects were shown a simulated interaction between a worker and supervisor in one of three goal-setting conditions: self-set, participative, or assigned. The worker either succeeded or failed to meet the set goal. Attributional distortions appeared greater in the assigned than in the participative or self-set conditions as a function of the worker's success or failure. The goal condition was varied by having the worker initially suggest a higher or lower goal than the one finally agreed upon: in that case, regardless of the worker's success or failure, subjects rated the high-goal worker significantly higher on performance and attributed to him more ability, effort, and commitment. Thus, participation in goal setting may in some instances hamper the objective appraisal of performance. (Author/CS)

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Goal Setting and Performance Evaluation: An Attributional

Analysis

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Abstract

The present study considered the effect of goal setting on supervisors' evaluations of a worker's performance and the causes attributed to that performance. Eighty subjects were shown a videotaped interaction between a worker and his supervisor in one of three goal-setting conditions: self set, participative or assigned. The worker's performance outcome was also manipulated by having the worker succeed or fail to meet the set goal. Results indicated that attributional distortions were greater in the assigned than in participative or self set goal-setting conditions as a function of the worker's success or failure. In addition, the participatively set goal condition was varied by having the worker either initially suggest a higher or lower goal than the one finally agreed upon. Regardless of the worker's success or failure in meeting the goal, supervisors rated the high-goal worker significantly higher on a performance rating and attributed more ability, effort, and goal commitment to him than the low-goal worker.

Goal Setting and Performance Evaluation

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Goal Setting and Performance Evaluation: An Attributional Analysis

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Since its appearance over a decade ago, Locke's (1968) theory of goal setting has become one of the most widely investigated techniques of motivating performance (Mitchell, 1979). Although a considerable amount of research has focused on the effects of participatively set goals on worker performance, little, if any, has focused on the performance appraisal process. While there is a considerable body of literature on rating errors made by judges or supervisors in selection and performance appraisal interviews (Landy & Trumbo, 1976), to date no research has systematically investigated the effects of rater errors on performance appraisal in the context of goal setting. It seems reasonable that a supervisor's evaluation of a worker's performance may be affected by information obtained during the goal setting process. As a supervisor's influence increases from self set, through participative to assigned goal-setting conditions, the worker's task performance becomes more hedonically relevant to the supervisor (Jones & Davis, 1965). That is, the success or failure of the worker in meeting a goal has potentially greater consequence for the supervisor. Thus, a supervisor may differentially distort a worker's performance evaluation as a function of the type of goal-setting process, especially if the worker failed to meet the goal.

The variable of goal attainment should be the most important

determinant of a supervisor's evaluation of performance. Building on Kelley's (1967) attribution theory, Weiner, Frieze, Kukla, Reed, Rest, and Rosenbaum (1971) propose that attributions regarding task success and failure affect the degree to which an observer attributes task performance to internal or external causes. Internal attributions are the actor's effort and ability, while external attributions are task difficulty and luck. For example, Garland and Price (1977) have shown that the success of female managers was attributed to luck and an easy task by prejudiced male managers while unprejudiced male managers attributed the success of their female counterparts to skill and hard work.

Additional information which may affect a supervisor's evaluation of performance is the difficulty of the goal to which a worker initially aspires relative to the final goal when it is participatively set. For example, a supervisor who is faced with a worker who initially suggests a very difficult goal is likely to draw different inferences regarding the causal factors of a worker's performance than when faced with a worker who initially suggests a relatively easy goal. Furthermore, the initial goal suggested by a worker may ultimately affect his performance rating given by the supervisor.

In sum, the present study was designed to ascertain the effects of different types of goal-setting procedures on a worker's performance evaluation and the perceived causes of that performance. Subjects played the role of a supervisor evaluating a worker's performance in one of three goal-setting conditions: participative, assigned, or self set. The participative goal-setting condition was further divided into two

conditions in which the worker suggested either a relatively hard or easy goal as compared to the final goal set. Each of these conditions was combined with the worker either succeeding or failing to meet the set. Sex of the subjects was treated as a blocking variable.

Method

Subjects

The participants were 30 male and 50 female undergraduates. There were 10 subjects in each of the eight experimental conditions.

Procedure

The first (goal setting) of two videotapes showed a worker and his supervisor discussing how a task should be done and setting a production goal. Subjects then completed a questionnaire assessing their impressions of the worker, the supervisor, and the discussion between them. The second videotape (performance) was a five-minute sequence of the worker performing the task. The task involved colating five order sheets in a specified order and adding numbers obtained from the five sheets. Subjects then completed a second questionnaire and rated the performance of the worker they had just viewed. The subjects were then debriefed and dismissed.

Goal-setting Manipulation

Four versions of the goal-setting videotape were produced. In one tape the worker set his own goal and in another the supervisor assigned the goal to the worker. The two participation tapes differed only on the goal initially suggested by the worker. In one tape (high-goal worker) the worker initially suggested a goal of 70 completed orders per hour, while in the other tape (low-goal worker) the initially suggested

goal was 50 correctly completed orders per hour. In each of these tapes the supervisor responded by suggesting 50 or 70 completed orders per hour, respectively. The final goal was set at 60 orders per hour in all four goal conditions. All tapes were identical except for the part pertaining to setting the goal.

Performance-Outcome Manipulation

The worker's performance outcome was manipulated in a written statement on the performance evaluation questionnaire. In the failure conditions subjects were told that the worker completed only 53 orders out of a goal of 60. In the success conditions the worker had completed 67 orders per hour.

Dependent Variables

Following the goal-setting tape subjects were asked to rate the worker's influence in setting the goal, his goal commitment and the subject's perceived goal difficulty on seven-point scales. Following the work-performance videotape and the success/failure manipulation, subjects rated the worker on similar scales assessing the worker's goal commitment, the extent to which his performance was due to luck, ability, goal difficulty, effort, and an overall performance rating.

Results

Goal-setting Effects

The data supported the prediction that workers who set their own goals would have the most influence, followed by participative and assigned goal-setting conditions, respectively, $F(2, 77) = 12.69$, $p < .01$. The worker was rated as having slightly more influence in the self-set condition ($M = 4.75$) than in the participative goal condition

($M = 4.18$). However, he was rated as having significantly less influence in the assigned-goal condition ($M = 2.25$) than either the self set, $t(38) = 4.35$, $p < .01$, or participative goal-setting conditions, $t(58) = 4.55$, $p < .01$. No significant main effects on the other dependent measures were found for goal setting.

Performance-outcome Effects

As predicted, success or failure in meeting the goal affected subjects' ratings of the worker on a number of dependent measures. Table 1 shows that the successful worker's performance was attributed significantly more to good luck, an easy goal, high effort and high ability than the unsuccessful worker. Similarly, the successful worker was rated higher in his overall performance and goal commitment than the failing worker.

Insert Table 1 about here

A repeated measures analysis of variance was performed on the pre and post performance goal commitment variable. Figure 1 shows that success or failure in meeting the goal significantly affected subjects' evaluation of the worker's goal commitment, $F(1, 74) = 22.26$, $p < .001$. Only posttask goal commitment was rated significantly different between success and failure conditions, $t(78) = 7.80$, $p < .001$. In the success condition posttask goal commitment increased significantly from the pretask measure, $t(78) = 3.16$, $p < .01$, while in the failure condition posttask goal commitment decreased significantly, $t(78) = 5.59$, $p < .001$.

Insert Figure 1 about here

Table 1
Summary of Results for Success and Failure Conditions

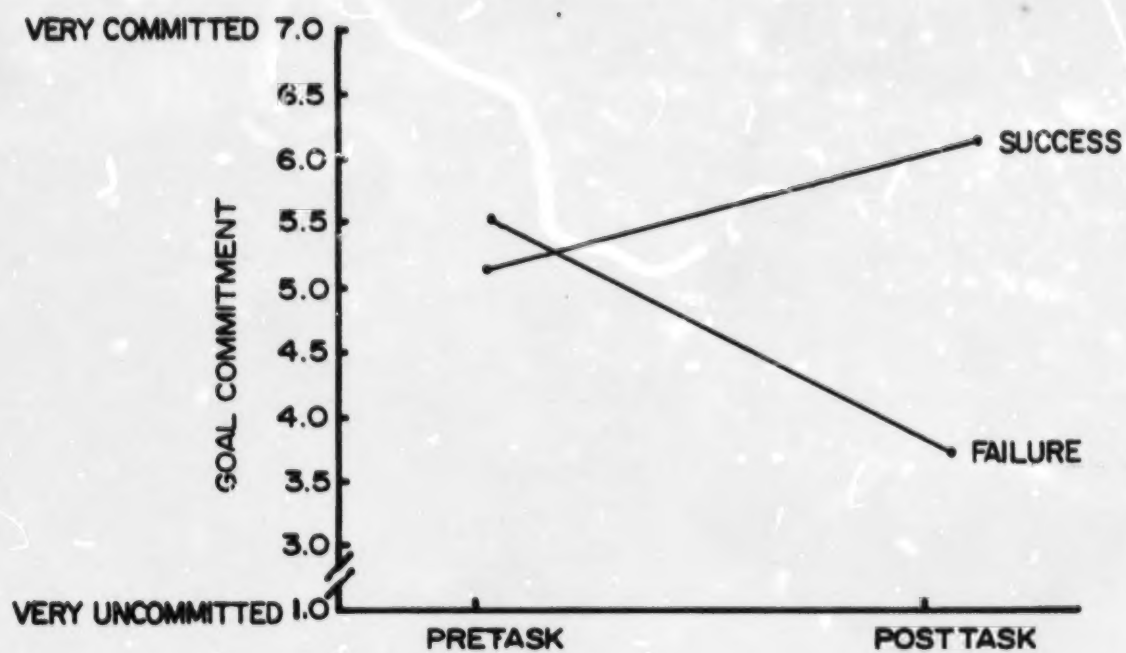
<u>Dependent Variable</u>	Success Mean	Failure Mean	DF	F
Bad Luck-Good Luck	4.65	3.91	1, 55	10.92**
Hard Goal-Easy Goal	4.74	3.91	1, 58	4.31*
Lack of Effort-High Effort	5.80	3.50	1, 61	47.14***
Lack of Ability-High Ability	5.36	4.52	1, 57	7.84**
Performance Rating	5.40	3.73	1, 68	38.15***
Posttask Goal Commitment	6.07	3.77	1, 68	66.16***

* $p < .05$

** $p < .01$

*** $p < .001$

FIGURE 1
PRE- AND POSTTASK GOAL COMMITMENT
AS A FUNCTION OF PERFORMANCE OUTCOME



Goal Setting x Performance Interaction Effects

Subjects' attributions of the worker's ability were significantly affected by the interaction of goal-setting and performance-outcome conditions, $F(2, 57) = 3.14, p < .05$. As shown in Figure 2, the only significant difference between success and failure was in the assigned goal-setting condition, $t(15) = 5.04, p < .001$. Contrary to prediction, there were no significant differences within the failure condition. However, the difference between self set and assigned goal setting conditions when the worker succeeded in meeting the goal was significant, $t(17) = 2.30, p < .05$.

Insert Figure 2 about here

Posttask goal commitment was also affected by a significant interaction, $F(2, 68) = 4.07, p < .05$. As predicted, there was a significant decrease in goal commitment only within the failure condition. Specifically, the decrease was significant between self set and assigned goal-setting conditions, $t(8) = 2.57, p < .05$ and between participative and assigned goal-setting conditions, $t(28) = 1.93, p < .05$. There were significant differences between success and failure conditions with participative goal setting, $t(38) = 5.62, p < .001$, and when the goal was assigned by the supervisor, $t(18) = 5.60, p < .001$.

Insert Figure 3 about here

Effects Within the Participative Goal Conditions

Prior to the performance outcome manipulation the data revealed a significant effect of the worker's initial goal level on the amount

of influence he had in setting the goal in the participative goal setting condition, $F(1, 39) = 6.40, p < .02$. Subjects rated the worker who initially suggested a relatively high goal as having more influence ($M = 4.75$) than the worker who initially suggested a relatively low goal ($M = 3.60$). Similarly, the high-goal worker was seen as being more committed to the task ($M = 6.05$) than the low-goal worker ($M = 4.45$), $F(1, 39) = 11.60, p < .002$.

Subsequent to the performance outcome manipulation, subjects attributed significantly higher goal commitment, effort, and ability to the high-goal worker as compared to the low-goal worker (see Table 2). In addition, the high-goal worker was rated significantly higher on his performance evaluation than the low-goal worker.

Insert Table 2 about here

The success/failure manipulation had a significant effect on subjects' attributions of the worker's performance and his performance rating. Significant differences are noted in Table 3. No significant interactions were found between initial goal level and performance outcome for any dependent variable within the participative goal-setting condition.

Insert Table 3 about here

Discussion

The prediction that performance attributions would be differentially affected by goal-setting conditions and performance outcomes was supported for subject's attributions of the worker's ability and goal

FIGURE 2
ABILITY ATTRIBUTION AS A FUNCTION
OF GOAL-SETTING CONDITION AND PERFORMANCE OUTCOME

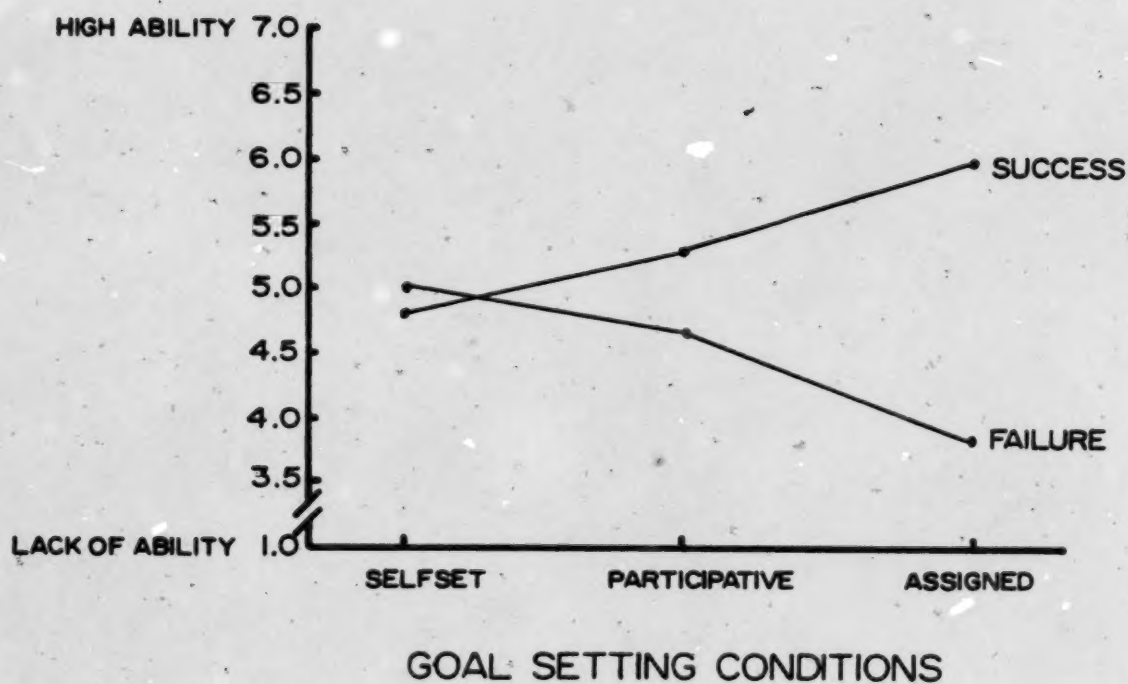


FIGURE 3
POSTTASK GOAL COMMITMENT ATTRIBUTION AS A FUNCTION OF
GOAL-SETTING CONDITION AND PERFORMANCE OUTCOME

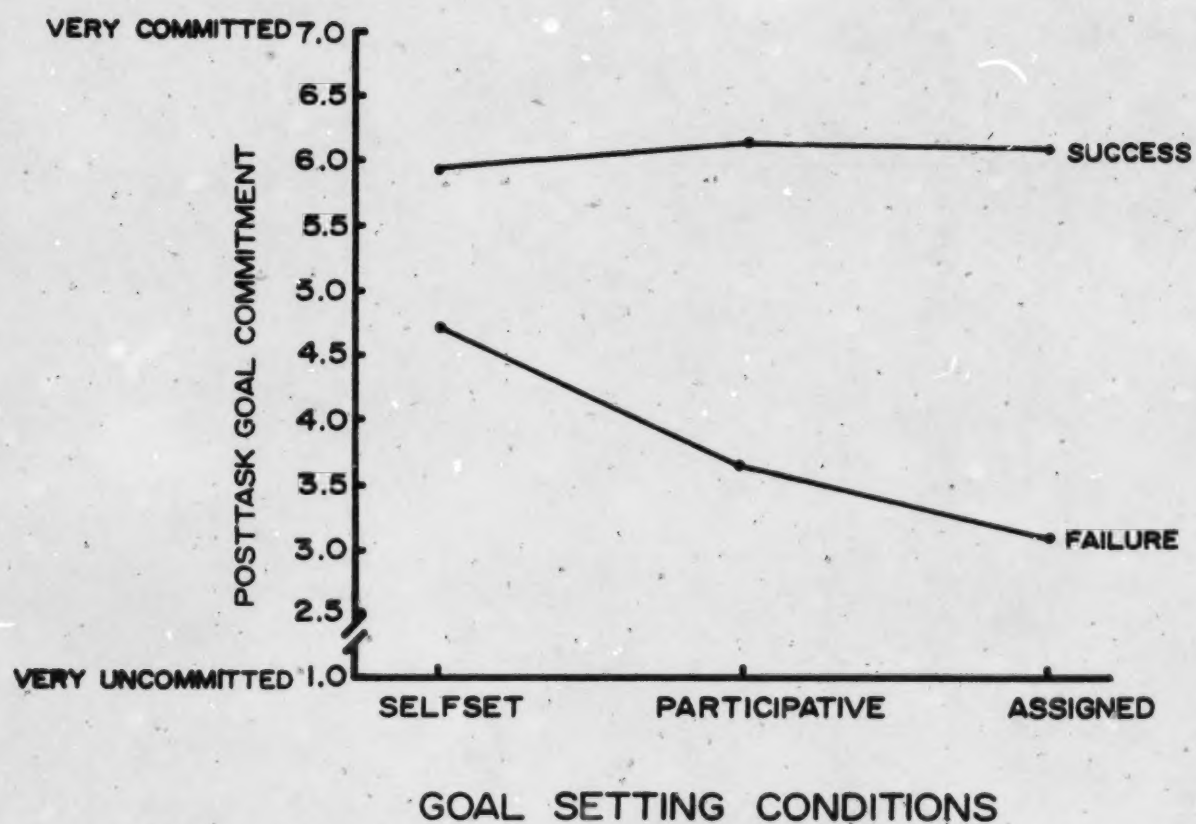


Table 2
Summary of Results for Worker High
and Worker Low Goal Conditions

<u>Dependent Variable</u>	High Goal Mean	Low Goal Mean	DF	F
Posttask Goal Commitment	5.35	4.45	1, 32	3.67*
Lack of Effort-High Effort	5.21	3.76	1, 28	5.15**
Lack of Ability-High Ability	5.47	4.50	1, 27	3.54*
Performance Rating	5.15	4.00	1, 32	8.11***

* $p < .07$

** $p < .05$

*** $p < .01$

Table 3
Summary of Results for Success
and Failure Conditions

<u>Dependent Variable</u>	Success Mean	Failure Mean	DF	F
Posttask Goal Commitment	6.15	3.65	1, 32	45.18***
Bad Luck-Good Luck	4.56	3.83	1, 26	7.67**
Hard Goal-Easy Goal	4.82	3.56	1, 27	5.43*
Lack of Effort-High Effort	5.88	3.45	1, 28	33.96***
Lack of Ability-High Ability	5.35	4.61	1, 27	4.45*
Performance Rating	5.45	3.70	1, 32	25.07***

* $p < .05$

** $p < .01$

*** $p < .001$

commitment. Subjects playing the role of the worker's supervisor increased the disparity of their ratings for the ability attribution between the success and failure conditions as their influence in setting the goal increased. This effect was especially noticeable in the assigned goal-setting condition where the supervisor was totally responsible for the goal level. Thus, as goal-setting conditions increased in hedonic relevance for the supervisor from self set through participative to assigned goal conditions, attributional distortions in ability became more pronounced.

Similarly, attributional distortions of the worker's goal commitment, which is a measure of the worker's perceived motivation to perform the task, increased as goal-setting conditions increased in hedonic relevance for the supervisor. However, with this variable we found attributional differences across goal-setting conditions for failing workers only. It appears as if the supervisors were defensively attributing the failure of the worker to meet the assigned goal to causes internal to the worker, i.e., goal commitment, rather than to external causes--the difficulty of the goal they set for the worker. Thus, the data support Jones and Davis' (1965) assertion that the hedonic relevance of an outcome acts to bias an observer's causal attributions.

The study failed to find any differential effect of goal setting and the worker's performance outcome on the overall performance evaluation. Consequently, the type of goal setting procedure used did not enter into the rating of a worker's performance, but only the perceived causes for performance. The overriding determinant of the worker's overall performance effectiveness was whether or not he was able to

meet the set goal. In short, the type of goal-setting procedure utilized in setting the goal only comes into play when evaluators are assessing the causes of a worker's performance outcome rather than the worker's overall effectiveness.

The analyses conducted within the participative goal-setting conditions revealed that supervisory ratings and attributions regarding the worker's performance outcomes were affected by the worker's initially suggested goal. Regardless of whether the worker succeeded or failed in meeting the agreed upon goal, supervisors rated the high-goal worker as having higher goal commitment, effort, and ability than the low-goal worker. These data suggest that the content of a participative goal-setting interaction between a supervisor and a worker plays a significant role in the supervisor's subsequent performance appraisal ratings. The worker suggesting a relatively harder goal than the supervisor was willing to accept may have facilitated attributions of higher internal motivational and ability states even before information regarding the worker's performance outcomes was provided. Thus, the worker's initial high-goal suggestion may have provided a positive halo effect for the supervisor when evaluating the worker's performance. In short, the high-goal worker appears to have bluffed his way into an inflated performance rating and more positive causal attributions for his performance.

The implications of these findings are that (a) contrary to popular opinion, participation in goal setting may lead to less objective appraisals of performance and that (b) while the process variables involved in participative goal setting are not well understood, the

relative difficulty of goal expectations held by a supervisor and worker as they enter the goal-setting process distort both the causal attributions of performance and the performance evaluation itself. Future studies of participatory management should recognize this potential source of invalidity and attempt to develop methods of correcting these distortions.

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